

MULTIPLE TO SINGLE FOCUS IN ADAPTATION OF TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

This paper does a comparative study of Tony Morrison's Beloved and its visual adaptation by Jonathan Demme in the year 1998. Incomplete portrayal of characters, inadequate descriptions of characters, omission of an important plot and cutting out of events lessens the complexity and emotions attached with the novel. The film adaptation witnesses a change of multilayer text into a one-heroine drama along with the change of multiple layered images into stories with limited focus. The story of African-American community is replaced by a heroic struggle, and the journey of its heroine, Sethe, played by Oprah Winfrey. This paper aims to study the above-mentioned changes while adapting the novel, Beloved.

KEYWORDS: *Beloved, Film, Slavery, Flashback & Past*

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INTRODUCTION

The film "Beloved" (1998), directed by Jonathan Demme features Oprah Winfrey as Sethe, Danny Glover as Paul D. Garner and Thandie Newton as Beloved. It is adapted from the novel *Beloved* published in 1987 by Toni Morrison. The novel is a chronicle of slavery depicting a black woman, Sethe and her journey from pre-Civil War days as a slave in Kentucky to her time in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. Although free in 1873, she is haunted by her past. Themes, portrayal of characters, events and techniques used in the movie adaptation are studied in comparison to the original text.

HORROR VS GRIEF

The movie begins with a tombstone with the name "Beloved" engraved on it. It immediately shows 124 Bluestone Road and some paranormal activities in the house and two boys running away from home. The tombstone probably tries to show that the paranormal activities are caused by the spirit of the dead baby. In the novel, the lines, "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom" (Chapter 1, 3) expresses the presence of beloved's spirit.

As Paul D enters the house, he feels something strong and asks Sethe "What kind of evil you got in here" (Chapter 1, Page 10). In the movie, a red light shines inside the house, which makes the scene even more dramatic and scary. In the novel, it is grief instead of fear that grips him: "It seemed a long way to the normal light surrounding the table, but he made it-dry eyed and lucky." (*Beloved*, Chapter 1, 11)

In the novel, Denver is described as a large woman, whereas her role is played by a small thin actress. The first 22 minutes of the movie is just a copy of the first chapter of the novel. In fact, the dialogues are quoted from the novel. The only variation that is seen is the use of flashback technique in the movie. The part in the novel where Sethe narrates the story of the tree in her back is shown as flashback in the movie. This enables the viewers to understand the past in a better way. However, the scene where Sethe's milk is taken away could have been omitted

from the movie. Also, Shame and Guilt, the two inevitable emotions associated with the novel do not find a prominent place in the movie.

PORTRAYAL VS REALITIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

Sethe and Paul, D. indulge in a physical relationship in Chapter 2. At the end of it, both of them are kind of remorseful about it.

“It was over before they could get their clothes off. Half-dressed and short of breath, they lay side by side resentful of one another and the skylight above them. His dreaming of her had been too long and too long ago. Her deprivation had been not having any dreams of her own at all. Now, they were sorry and too shy to make talk”

(*Beloved*, Chapter 2, 24–25)

In the film, however, Paul D and Sethe are shown regretless after making love for the first time. The complexity of their relationship and desires are reduced for the convenience of the already lengthy movie.

In the beginning of Chapter 5, *“Denver ran a mighty interference and on the third day flat-out asked Paul D how long he was going to hang around.”* Sethe reacted by saying *“Denver! What’s got into you?”* Sethe looked at her daughter, *feeling more embarrassed than angry.* (Page 52). However, in the movie, Denver asks her mother how long he is staying and her mother replies that she does not know. The way Sethe replies kind of shows that she too wants him to leave as soon as possible. In the previous scene, it is interesting to note that Paul D asks about taking them to the carnival with the 2 dollars he has and also finding a job there itself. In simple words, the movie provides the scope for the audience to believe that Sethe is manipulated by Paul D to take him in and the immediate next scene where Sethe tells Denver that she does not know when Paul D will leave, whereas the novel shows that the feelings between them are mutual.

The movie shows Paul D putting on extra effort to make Denver like him. For instance, in 33:50, Paul D asks Denver if he could take a sip from her drink. She appears hesitant initially but when he returns the glass, he wipes away the part of the glass, which his lips touched, and at the very moment shows Denver smiling. This was not in the novel but used as a way to show the audience that Denver is slowly starting to like Paul D.

TREATMENT OF SLAVERY AND BRUTALITY

Slavery is an apparent theme in the novel. Slavery buries their own identity. *“Beloved”* explores the effects of both physical and emotional destruction of slavery. The characters who are free are still haunted by their past. They were treated like animals. Be it Sethe or Paul D, both of them seem to be self-alienated and self-loathing, which is an inevitable effect of slavery.

Two stories go parallel in the novel. One story deals with slavery pre-Civil War and the other deals with slavery post-Civil War. However, the movie does not highlight the life at Sweet Home, as it deals with Slavery post-Civil War and hence the impact of slavery is not intensely portrayed. Some parts, such as when Sethe’s thinks about her marriage, her life at Sweet Home and the story of Denver’s birth are skipped in the movie. However, some snapshots of past are portrayed as dreams.

Chapter 10 is not featured in the movie. This chapter focuses on Paul D’s life after he tried to kill his master Brandywine. He has to live a wretched life and he is kept in prison. The prison is like a coffin and there are 45 of them.

This episode shows the life of a slave where they are treated more as animals than humans. Another important aspect of this chapter is that it shows a kind of brotherhood. They are tied physically and these ties strengthen the brotherhood. The movie is focussed on the present storyline since the beginning, so it comes as no surprise that this chapter is omitted.

“The typical format of the slave narrative is to trace the story of individual’s life in slavery, escape and the journey to freedom. What Morrison reveals is that the process must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the psychological trauma created by their brutality. The physical escape of both Sethe and Paul D create the patterns for their psychological escape; archetypal journeys of courage, descends into almost certain death, rebirths into freedom and beauty”

(David L. Middleton, *Toni Morrison’s Fiction*)

The movie, no doubt, tries to show this journey of Sethe; however, Paul D’s journey is not given its due, although it is noteworthy that Paul D’s story is equally important in the novel, as it is the story of a slave’s journey towards freedom.

IDENTITY OF BELOVED

The character of Beloved is not complex in the movie, as it is in the novel. Since it is a visual medium, the audience can imagine and interpret the character of Beloved based on her various ways of acting. The theme of other worldly aspects like ghost is not apparent in the movie. The technique of red light does not convince the audience of paranormal activity and neither is Beloved’s character convincing enough.

Movie is not completely at sync with the novel. Sequences in the novel are not maintained in the movie. Beloved’s relation with Denver is shown to grow eventually, but certain things are additionally included. Identity of Beloved in the novel has been forever in question and the movie seems to portray another aspect of her identity. For a 21st century viewer, Beloved may appear to be a mental patient. She may be mad or a psychopath. Her inability to cope with people, the way she speaks and in the scene 42:50, the way she is shown to wanting to eat the chicken provides scope for a viewer to believe that Beloved is mentally challenged.

In the movie, Paul D does not seem to have much issue with Beloved in the beginning. It is only in the dinner table at 53:40, Paul D interrogates about her identity and there too he just seems to be curious about her past that he does not want her to stay and that is not portrayed properly. In the novel, Paul D disapproves of Beloved from the beginning. In fact, he does not like the idea of Beloved staying in their home. “*You just gonna feed her? From now on?*” Paul D, feeling ungenerous, and surprised by it, heard the irritability in his voice. (67)

The part where Beloved asks Sethe about her earrings is almost similar to the novel. In fact, most of the dialogues are quoted exactly from the novel. The use of flashback in the movie to explain how Sethe’s mother was hanged is effective in that it and enables better understanding of the situation to the viewers.

In scene 53:40, the movie uses Beloved as a medium to let the viewers know about Paul D’s situation in the past few years. Beloved asks him about his people and his past whereabouts and Paul D starts narrating certain things. Another possibility about Beloved’s identity seems to surface in the movie. She may be a thug who needs a place to stay and her outburst and sudden health deterioration may be just a way to cover up the possibility of her actual self, as Paul D begins to interrogate her. The actor’s expressions and body language during the entire scene brings out that possibility. While reading the novel, one can only imagine, but the movie creates a concrete picture.

FLASHBACK TECHNIQUE INEFFICIENCY AND NEGLECTING THE PAST

Flashback technique is used to tell how Sethe's mother dies. This part could have been excluded, as its absence will not change the main plot. On the other hand, something as important as Paul D telling Sethe as to how her husband Halle saw her milk being taken away is not shown through flashback. This makes one thing clear that the movie is not focusing on the past, i.e., their life at Sweet Home. Sweet Home forms an inevitable part in the novel. The movie seems to ignore the 1855 storyline of the novel. The characters of Sweet Home, it seems, are not featured in the movie. Halle is mentioned but the other brothers Sixo, Paul A, Paul F are not mentioned at all. The novel gives a glimpse of Sweet Home characters in the very beginning itself.

"There had been six of them who belonged to the farm, Sethe, the only female. Mrs. Garner, crying like a baby, had sold his brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed. Then, schoolteacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more sweet home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight."

(Beloved, 11)

The agony and sufferings of the past is ignored in the film adaption

The next scene, Denver narrates her birth story to Beloved with the flashback technique. The story of her birth is continued with the story of their arrival at 124. The movie does not follow the sequence of the novel for the convenience of the screenplay. As it has been apparent at many points in the movie, the movie has focused in the life after Sweet Home.

SIDELINING OF CHARACTERS AND SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS

The movie has taken the liberty to ignore certain noteworthy moments from the novel. The movie uses the flashback technique to show the scene where Baby Suggs assembled the people and helps them to dissipate their sorrows by dancing, singing, weeping and laughing:

"It started that way: Laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until exhausted and riven, all and each lay about clearing the damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs holy, offered up to them her great big heart"

(Beloved, 103)

This part is beautifully shown in the movie as if it is happening right in front of Sethe, Denver and Beloved's eyes, but immediately after that there is a part where Sethe sits on Baby Suggs' rock and she feels Baby Suggs fingers touching her neck almost as if strangling her:

"Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles on the way. Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled" (113) and after that Beloved tries to soothe Sethe by touching her bruises in the neck : "Beloved's fingers were heavenly. Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her "

(Beloved, 114)

This is important because this is an encounter with Baby Suggs' spirit and she has influenced Sethe to a great extent. This encounter stands testimony to the fact that Baby Suggs continues to be with Sethe even after her death, and this encounter reveals the peace *Beloved* brings into Sethe's life, but the movie clearly is not focusing much on Baby Suggs either, so the encounter is not featured in the movie.

Ella is not featured in the movie. Sethe meets her while crossing the river with Denver:

"My name is Ella," she said, taking a wool blanket, cotton cloth, two baked sweet potatoes and a pair of men's shoes from the sack. "My husband, John, is out yonder a ways. Where are you heading?"

(Beloved, 108)

Like other minor characters, Ella is ignored as well.

Stamp Paid visits 124 in the novel and enquires about *Beloved* to John and Ella, as she is unknown to him. In the movie, Stamp Paid's role is strictly limited to his showing Paul D the picture and in the flashback. John and Ella are also insignificant to the screenplay.

The movie follows the event sequence from the novel sequence as per the screenplay's convenience. Any event associated with Sethe is given front seat and it is obvious considering the fact that the movie is presented in a way that it depicts the life of its heroine, Sethe. Denver's attachment to *Beloved* is not included in the movie.

The movie ignores Chapter 12 but features Chapter 13, where Paul D goes to meet Sethe in her workplace. Before meeting her, many thought bothers Paul D regarding his past, his manhood, etc. But since it is not possible to showcase the entire thought process in the scene, the scene presents Paul D practising what he is going to say to Sethe: "Fixing me. Sethe, she has fixed me and I cannot break it." (149) On their way home, it snows and the movie features the scene. The idea of a man and woman in love walking and the snowfall is romantic. Hollywood welcomes such romantic notion; however, in the novel, *Beloved* approaches them immediately after this:

"It was nearly 4 o'clock now and 124 was half a mile ahead. Floating toward them, barely visible in the drifting snow, was a figure and although it was the same figure that had been meeting Sethe for four months, so complete was the attention she and Paul D were paying to themselves, that they both felt a jolt when they saw her close in."

(Beloved, 153).

This part is not part of the movie.

Chapter 14 makes an apparent expression that *Beloved* does not like Paul D and wants him to leave. The movie neither focuses much on Denver and *Beloved*'s relation nor upon the silent conflict between Paul D and *Beloved*. Both Paul D and *Beloved* wants Sethe and both want each other out of her life. In Chapter 14, when Paul D and Sethe are together on the upper floor, *Beloved* wants him away from 124:

"Beloved, inserting a thumb in her mouth along with the forefinger, pulled out a molar tooth. There was hardly any blood in the tooth. There was hardly any blood, but Denver said, "Ooooh, did not that hurt you?"

(Beloved, 157)

The pulling out of tooth could be an outburst of her disapproval of Paul D and *Beloved*'s togetherness or it is another characteristic of her paranormal being, but the movie chose to ignore this chapter.

In Chapters 15 and 16, there is a detailed description of the baby's death, and the destructive action that takes place when the four horsemen arrive at 124. Chapter 17 reveals Stamp Paid letting Paul D know about the picture of Sethe and the arrival of the four horsemen. In simple words, the three chapters disclose the details satisfying the readers' curiosity to know the past. The movie, however, jumps to Chapter 17 from Chapter 13 and then uses the method of confrontation, where Sethe tells Paul D the entire story in flashback. In a way, it is convenient as it saves time and the flashback technique, i.e., visual depiction enables the viewers to understand the entire scene in a better way.

CHRONOLOGY

Events take place haphazardly in the film adaptation, sidetracking it from the original narrative. Sethe, Beloved and Denver are shown to have warm milk but the previous act of them skating in the ice is ignored. 56:35, where they drink milk could have been ignored as well but this is important from the aspect that it shows probable signs of Beloved being the dead baby. Her humming of the piece, which Sethe sings for her children and the line in her neck makes Sethe say, "*You came back to me*". The happiness in Sethe's countenance is apparent in the movie. However, it is noteworthy that in the novel two stories proceed parallelly on the day where Sethe gets late for work. One takes place in her mind of her life in Sweet Home after Mr Garner's death and the other indicates the present day. As evident since the beginning, the first story is removed from the movie 51:33, which shows Sethe being fired but in the novel she is not fired that way. The celebration that is shown in 124 after that is a bit exaggerated

CONCLUSIONS

It has been suggested that changes made in the movie version are significant and alter some of the interpretation and concern of the novel. The essence of *Beloved* is the major theme of the novel, i.e., Slavery. *Beloved* focuses on Post Slavery than Pre Slavery. Even in Post Slavery, the movie focuses on its heroine, Oprah Winfrey – Sethe's journey and several strands of the book are ignored. The visual medium, it can be argued, cannot sustain multiple layers of meaning that the written text offers to the interpretation. Thus, the movie may appear to compromise a little in comparison to the power of the novel. The novel draws its power from a rich ambiguity of structure and design, whereas the movie seeks to draw its power from performance, characterization and visual representation. The film, however, was a failure at the box office and could not come close to earn back its investment. We can argue that the differences are thematic and medial.

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